DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 452 SP 036 214

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TITLE A Democratic Assessment Technique.
PUB DATE Feb 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (Washington, DC, February 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; *Cooperative Learning; Democratic Values; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; *Group Discussion; Group Instruction; *Group Testing; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Carthage College WI; Junior Great Books Program; Student Record of Behavior

ABSTRACT

When one instructor began to use cooperative learning groups as a main teaching strategy in teacher education courses, she designed a large group oral exam format to take the place of traditional paper-and-pencil testing. The group oral exam format reduced text anxiety as there was no right or wrong response; it drew on both the cognitive and affective domains, and demanded individual input, critical analysis and thinking, use of synthesis, and valuing and organization. In this format the 30-student class broke into their usual cooperative small groups to develop a consensus on the topic presented. In each group each idea was supported and accepted before it was presented in the large group sharing period. Then each group shared one conclusion that evolved. After this an outline for the class essay was created. Agreement was reached on specifications for the essay, and the resulting piece reflected the thought power of the entire class. For evaluation, the instructor used the Student Record of Behavior, a classroom observation instrument, and the seating chart instrument from the Junior Great Books discussion group procedure that provides written evidence of participation and quality of information. The teacher became not a proctor but an active though mostly silent facilitator. (Contains 15 references.) (JB)

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A DEMOCRATIC ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

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A Democratic Assessment Technique

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Introduction

When I began using cooperative learning groups as a main teaching strategy I recognized that traditional paper and pencil tests were not appropriate instruments for assessing student progress. As teachers increase the variety of teaching strategies used in the classroom, we need to increase the types of assessment strategies. Thus we have portfolios, performance criteria assessment, oral examinations, just to mention a few. To ensure competency of our students, both in school and in their performance in the work force and society, we must seek more appropriate assessment techniques that reflect instructional strategies. My approach, to solving the needs of assessment that reflect multiple teaching strategies, accountability, and the demands of American democracy, is the large group oral exam.

Review of Literature

Recognizing the problems of written test Owens (1991) writes that some people tend to express themselves best through oral communications, not the written word. Jones (1987) believes there is strong evidence supporting multimodal approaches to reducing test anxiety. According to the author Change, as noted by Jones (1987), test anxiety appears to be a multidimensional problem requiring multiple techniques to reduce test-anxious behavior. These statements and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence reinforce the contention that we need more than paper-and-pencil test in our classrooms. Armstrong in 7 Kinds of Smarts describes the characteristics of these multiple intelligences, encourages teachers to be cognizant of multiple intelligences, and to use this knowledge in teaching to enhance pupil learning. Concurrently, Kopack-Hill in Seven Goods Ways to Learn warns "...if most of our assessment techniques centered on verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligence, we would miss 5/7 of our effort" (Kopack-Hill, 1992, p. 23).

The time has come to explore multiple intelligences with assessment at all levels of learning. As we come to recognize the validity of Gardner's multiple intelligences and the profoundness of Owens', Jones' and Kopack-Hill's

statements, we must be cognizant of the multiple ways people learn while we are teaching and while we are assessing and evaluating. Unfortunately, while we are using multiple methods of teaching, from hands-on-manipulation and cooperative learning groups, to on-the-job learning for adolescence, we still find ourselves wedded to the paper and pencil type of assessment. Thus we need to create alternative assessment techniques; no longer are paper-and-pencil tests adequate assessment. We need something besides the portfolio of written work, too. However, individual oral exams take time, so another alternative must be found.

One such alternative assessment combines oral skills and cooperative learning groups, as an option we can use in the classroom; it is something all teachers can use in some of their assessment areas. An alternative assessment technique is the large group oral exam. I have developed a unique assessment procedure. There are other oral exams as reported by Dressel, Tschirner, Jarausch, Young, Gutstein and Goodwin, and Nelson just to name a few. This researcher found the anxiety level of the students to have been reduced to near zero, which is not Dressler's findings (Dressler, 1991). In addition, this assessment strategy implements the ideals of democracy. As we progress through the process of this assessment procedure, we will discover that the role of each member resembles the early democratic process in Colonial America, the Town Meeting, where each individual may be heard, where each individual affects the outcome of the meeting and the legislation proposed for the community.

What is the role/purpose/intent of assessment, especially in light of an emphasis on cooperative learning? If we devote much of our class time to small group work and discussion, is it appropriate to have paper and pencil type individual assessment? This new approach does not imply abandoning individual accountability nor deleting paper and pencil tests. There is a place for the essay exam and for the multiple choice exam. What is being advocated here is the use of another, at times more appropriate, method for assessment. The method we use to evaluate a person's performance should reflect the procedures used in learning content or tasks. For instance, if we are teaching critical thinking skills, then we should present a situation requiring critical thinking skills to ascertain the students' level of competence. Or, to verify writing across the

curriculum, check the writing in, say, a math class, or look for the quality of writing an individual has when writing out how she or he approached and finally solved a math problem, or when writing a letter to his or her representative in Congress or the state legislature.

If a class does engage in cooperative learning, assess the competency of the individual by evaluating the quality of individual's contribution to the group and the groups' performance? This does require the instructor to be very organized, to be cognizant of what each group and individuals within the groups are doing. It is not an easy task. The instructor needs to validate the very subjective nature of any evaluative decision. Teacher becomes, not a proctor, but an active though mostly silent facilitator.

The group oral exam works very effectively. It brings in both the cognitive and affective domains. It provides for individual input, reflections and verification and inter- and intra-group support for the presentation. It is non-threatening since there is no right or wrong response, only well documented, agreed upon proposals. Critical analysis and critical thinking, two of several of the higher order assessment levels, are required. The students use synthesis when they create their small group set of responses and more dramatically when they consolidate the shared ideas during the large group discussion. They project analysis in their ability to identify parts that belong to the issue at hand, while being aware of the community in which we all live. Valuing and organization as well as the earlier stages of the affective domain of awareness and reality, are in evidence at the individual, small cooperative group and large group levels.

An example

When the emphasis is upon cooperative learning, with an issues oriented approach including much reading, then the assessment instrument should reflect these strategies. There maybe some lectures/discussions, with assessment including multiple choice tests, in-class essays and summation papers, as well as decision papers. The emphasis in my experimental classes, however, has been on group work in a discussion mode that reflects group resolution of problems rather than individual responses. Thus this writer ventured forth with what

might be a new frontier--one oral exam for 30 or more students. The format has been for the class to break into their usual cooperative groups to develop a consensus on the topic presented. In the small groups each idea has to be supported and accepted before it is presented in the large group sharing period. Time is needed to enable the learning groups to create an outline for their cooperative group essay which will be contributed to the large group. Subsequently, each group shares one aspect, one concern, one decision that the group has evolved, repeating the group sharing process until the groups' efforts are exhausted. Then an outline for the class essay is created from the sharing and discussion portions, which tends to be lively and orderly with substantial support for positions taken. These students are involved in the practice of critical thinking. Synergy abounds! In the experiences reported here, there has been a respectful openness and responsive freedom in the class. Agreement usually is reached rather quickly on the specifications for the essay, and the phrases for areas within the essay emerge. Consensus building among groups is amazing. The resulting large group essay reflects the thought power of the entire class. The experiences reached beyond this writer's wildest expectations. Not one imagined fear was manifested. These people grappled with the issues, realized the limitations of human and economic resources, and created an essay reflecting the issue presented. The support, defense, and objections for each thought presented have been as marvelous as the final product.

The enthusiasm and joy the students exhibited are overwhelming. In spite of the realization this assessment technique would be an A or an F, one grade for all (unless there was an unusually unresponsive group member), anxiety was absent. The students were free to visit and listen to other groups--sharing ideas, hitching on to ideas, brainstorming; nothing was right or wrong. The point here was, could the group/individual support a position? Some students may be irresponsible regarding these opportunities, but the majority remain on task with their group. Just knowing they have some freedom creates the stress-reduced environment.

One examination had the objective to fax a letter to the state senate hearing on the Choice program to express the class' concerns, proposals/options

and referenced support for the groups' decisions; another time the class created their own national goals for education. As a culminating activity of a unit, a fourth grade teacher's class wrote a letter to their representative regarding the destruction of the rain forest.

Multicultural education has many approaches for curriculum reform. Banks (1994) considers the social action approach the highest level of reform. Whenever the large group oral examination technique has been used it has resulted in student decisions on important social issues and student actions to help solve them.

Evaluation for Grading

Any assessment apparatus needs to reflect not only the goals and objectives of instruction, but the methodology of instruction. It should reflect the philosophy of the school and classroom teacher. If we believe that education is a natural, pleasant experience, the evaluation methods we use should reflect these beliefs, also.

People of all ages recognize bias, unfairness and unwarranted rewards. As educators we must improve the quality of assessment comparable to the changing methods/strategies we bring to the learning situation by creating dynamic learning environments in the classroom. Part of the learning environment includes the examination or proof of comprehension and (its) application.

If we are using cooperative learning, then cooperative learning groups need to be part of the assessment/evaluation process. If large group discussion is a part of the teaching strategy, then it should be part of the assessment. If writing across the curriculum is part of the school philosophy, it should be part of the exam process, as well as the portfolio. The portfolio is part of the final overall assessment/evaluation of performance in many classes and is recommended for classes using the large group oral examination technique.

Since the evaluation of an oral exam is very subjective, and we all want to be fair, a technique for evaluation that tends to guarantee fairness is important. " ...[T]he Student Record of Behavior (StRoBe), [is] a classroom observation instrument designed to provide simple low inference information concerning student behavior related to engagement in learning" (Marchant, 1991,

p.15). Timm has used this instrument with college cooperative learning groups (Timm and Marchant, 1992) as well as in K-12 classes to assess pre-service teachers in field observations of pupil behavior. The StRoBe grid approach is excellent in isolating each cooperative group and enables the observer to record repeatedly the behavior of the group and individuals within the group. It is revealing to observe how often a member is actively involved and contributing to the group. By perusing the classroom, the teacher can also ascertain if the group is on task. The StRoBe provides concrete evidence to support the teacher's instinct that individuals within a group are successfully participating. Another technique that is effective here, is the seating chart, which comes from the Junior Great Books discussion group procedure. It provides written evidence of participation and quality of information, as the recorder's notes, in each cooperative learning group, indicate who says what; from the notes the leader guides the discussion and prevents digression from the task. Typically, the teacher collects these notes at the end of the session for evaluation and response. The teacher is less intrusive in this process; the teacher becomes a roving facilitator (E. Blandford, personal communication, January 12, 1995).

Conclusions and Implications for Teachers

After the exam, a number of people came to express their pleasure and surprise over their lack of anxiety, and the pride and pleasure in the knowledge they gained from others; their recognition of their own content based knowledge is indicative of the positive situation this form of oral examination created. The students respect the ideas of others, they accept others' beliefs, (giving and requiring support for positions), they learn patience, they learn not to be the dominate leader, yet they fight for their ideals when they can be supported. All these attributes contribute to the survival of democracy, for the individual develops the crucial creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, shared responsibility. There has been a tendency to reflect that, "If I fail, we fail; and if I succeed we succeed." A better thought from this strategy has emerged: "If we fail, I fail, and if we succeed, then I succeed."

What are the implications for you and your students/pupils? Although there are challenges, they are easily met with organization, motivation, and a positive attitude. For example, the teacher MUST be cognizant of what each group is doing and the role each group member takes. Also, the teacher and the group members must identify early in the course the "slackers" and watch them at the exam. Furthermore, as the teacher, you may need to indicate that an individual may not succeed, while the group succeeds; StRoBe will help with this phase. But ultimately for test takers, the large group oral exam tends to have significant positive effects. It:

1. reduces anxiety;
2. promotes the idea that evaluation and assessment accompany activities;
3. nurtures the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts--the gestalt;
4. provides growth through diversity/multiplicity (tunnel vision lessens in group dynamics);
5. shows that cooperative effort is applicable anywhere, but sometimes it is not appropriate everywhere;
6. promotes critical thinking and critical analysis in the classroom, not just for the retrieval of information;
7. applies in many disciplines: in math class--solving one or more problems together; in computer class--all real world computer programmers work in teams; in English---the play, dramatic or interpretive reading require large group oral performance/ presentation;
8. develops consensus building, not only in small groups but in large groups, such as they, as citizens, will encounter in community, school, and work situations;
9. promotes democracy in action: students participate in social action situations reminiscent of the Town Meeting.

While this assessment strategy is not for every content subject, nor applicable for every unit of work, where it is an appropriate assessment/ evaluative instrument, it appears to be very effective.Excellent results in the

product of the group(s) and positive feedback of students on the process suggest the large group oral exam is a superb strategy K-16 classroom teachers should use.

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